centres for tobacco farmers from West Godavari district in Andhra Pradesh;

(b) the number of offices or registration centres for tobacco farmers in West Godavari district;

(c) how does the Tobacco Board propose to assist farmers in this regard; and

(d) if so, the details of steps proposed?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE (SHRI RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE): (a) No, Sir.

(b) The Tobacco Board have established 3 offices (Auction platform) at Jangareddygudem, Koyyalagudem and Devarapalli in West Godavari district for registering farmers. Farmers in the tobacco growing village in and around Kovvuru were facilitated to register at 'Thorredu' auction platform located in East Godavari district.

(c) and (d) The Tobacco Board Proposes to register the farmers for the 1998-99 crop season at their allotted auction platforms centres as was done in the previous years. The opening and closing dates of registration will be informed to the growers by the field staff of the Board and also displayed on the Notice Boards at Tobacco Board Offices and widely publicised through press and other media. Applications, if any, received after closure of the registration date but before the meeting of the Registration Committee will be considered by the Registration Committee, if these applications are otherwise found to be eligible as per the criteria laid down.

Increase in Trade Deficit

1223. SHRI O.P. KOHLI: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that even after improvement in the export performance there has been heavy increase in the trade deficit;

(b) if so, the reasons therefor and the steps tken to improve the trade deficit; and

(c) whether the customs, excise collections have fallen short of target?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE (SHRI RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE): (a) As per the provisional data available from Directorate General, Commercial Intelligence and Statistics, exports registred a growth of 2.64% in US $ terms in 1997-98 as against 4.01% in 1996-97.

This has resulated in a higher trade deficit of Rs. 25267.76 crores in 1997-98. The correspondiong figures for 1996-97 is Rs. 19319.76 crores;

(b) The trade deficit is the excess of imports over exports. There has an increased in overall imports due to increase import of petroleum products and fertilizers besides raw materials and intermediates required for domestic production and exports, which is the basic need of a vibrant economy. The key to reducing trade deficit lies in accelerated export growth and export promotion measures are continuously being taken by the Government to enhance the export growth of the country.

(c) Yes, Sir.

Import of Mineral Water

1224. SHRI S.M. KRISHNA: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have allowed the import of mineral/natural spring water;

(b) if so, since when and the details of the names of companies importing mineral water/natural spring water specially under the trade name of 'EVIAN' natural spring water from French Alps;

(c) what are the reasons for allowing import of such water; and